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# MELISSA REAPS BENEFITS FROM STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

By **Celso Martinez**, President, Municipal Voice



It's a universal truth that relationships evolve, that these interactions have lives of their own. Whether interpersonal relationships or relationships between large organizations, they will eventually experience ups and downs, opportunities, and challenges.

Often, the positive or negative tone of a relationship, especially for organizations that interact with other organizations in the same community, is a function of the individuals or groups that set the organizations' policies, define its goals and objectives, steer the conversations, and establish the association's overall atmosphere and culture.

For the City of Melissa and the Melissa Independent School District (ISD), like many institutions that share a constituency, the relationship between them has naturally undergone some of these interactions at various times.

Since the summer of 2016 though, the relationship between these two expanding organizations has been reshaping itself into a symbiotic bond that has yielded unprecedented benefits for both emerging entities. What has developed is more a partnership than a relationship, more a deep collaborative than a casual linkage.

Moreover, the close, highly-cooperative, intensely-transformational relationship, already deeply ingrained in the two organizations, continues to evolve, breaking new ground for both – to the ultimate benefit of the citizens of Melissa and the students, parents, staff, and supporters of the Melissa ISD. And, like all of these intensifying relationships, it's driven by the resolve of the people at the core of both. Certainly Mayor Reed Greer and Melissa ISD School Board President George James deserve the lion's share of credit. The two understand, better than

most, that service to the greater Melissa community is their primary function, and more importantly, they both know that building a foundational partnership with each other is the key that unlocks the proverbial doors of opportunity.

In like manner, the members of the Melissa City Council and Melissa ISD board are just as fully invested in the partnership and each elected official is outspoken in their unqualified support. Significantly, the winner of the MISD Volunteer of the Year Award in 2018 now sits on the City Council as an at-large representative.

Notwithstanding the full support at the top, the physical expression of the City of Melissa and Melissa ISD relationship occurs at the staff level. City Manager Jason Little and Superintendent of Schools Keith Murphy have been unequivocal in their determination to see that the relationship lives up to, and exceeds, the vision of their respective organizations.

The City Manager sits on several MISD ad hoc and standing committees, and is a trusted resource for the Superintendent, each leader lending their personal energy to ensure the lines of communication are always open and that chatter, official and otherwise, is kept constant.

Duke Sparks, Melissa ISD's director of athletic operations and community partnerships, has fittingly provided the spark that has ignited the fervor that keeps the relationship aflame. His rapid-fire delivery of facts and figure is sometimes hard to follow, as his enthusiasm far outpaces his ability to formulate his words. The infectious nature of Sparks' dedication to ensuring the City and ISD relationship stays on the upswing is refreshingly youthful, belying his senior status.



Cooperation at every level between the two entities is, in fact, seamless. To an outsider, it would be as difficult to discern the allegiance of City employees versus district employees as it would be to tell apart a set of identical twins.

Examples abound. But at the top, the commitment to a combined and coordinated pledge of service to each other's shared mission was clearly demonstrated with the Council's unanimous vote awarding a \$40,000 grant from the City of Melissa to the Melissa ISD Police Department. The grant carried no stipulations or conditions other than it be used to elevate the safety and security of students at school campuses and school facilities.

The district's transportation maintenance lot, called the "bus barn" because the dozens of buses parked there resemble a herd of cattle, required a variance from the City's Code Compliance Department to be in full conformity. School officials duly applied, and in the spirit of collaboration and teamwork, the variance was granted after the request was fully vetted. Code regulations were met, of course,

ensuring that the bus barn was in complete compliance once the variance was granted.

Staff members at the Melissa Public Library interact regularly with students, teachers, and staff from several MISD schools, presenting special programs often designed to fit into the curriculum of study. While slightly distinct in their overall missions, the library and schools coordinate and cooperate in assisting each other meet their various undertakings.

Melissa Municipal Court partners with the district in the Texas Department of Transportation-sponsored Municipal Traffic Safety Initiative program, including annual Back to School safety events, interactive displays at the high school on driving safety, and many other student-directed traffic safety programs. The Court staff has hosted mock trials with middle school students acting as judges, prosecutors, and defendants. Regular tours of the Court are provided to students of all ages.

Although the hand-in-hand relationship is extremely strong in a variety of areas, the relationship between these two

major organizations is most evident in the Texas Sports Village at the Z-Plex, a premier, first-class baseball, softball, and tennis facility constructed on City land bordering the high school campus.

Along with community activist Doug Zadow and members of the recently formed Melissa Sports LLC, the City and the school district joined forces to design, construct, and manage the sports complex. Just completing its first full year of operation, the complex has already hosted Division I college baseball games, the Don Mattingly World Series, a national-level baseball tournament, and will be the host park for the Pudge Rodriguez World Classic.

The Z-Plex is also, of course, the home field of the various Melissa High School Cardinal boys' and girls' teams. Students in the district's Career and Technical Education (CTE) program practice their computer and graphic skills by operating the high-tech scoreboards at the fields, while CTE students in other sports and hospitality related disciplines are also able to gain real-world experience.

The constant play at the Z-Plex has attracted thousands of players, coaches, support personnel, parents, and a fair share of scouts from colleges, universities, and even many professional baseball teams. The draw is national in scope, as teams from coast to coast converge on Melissa to play.

And, from the "be careful what you wish for" department, the weekly influx of fans and family driving personal vehicles, completely full school buses, and a steady stream of large 40-50 passenger coaches means that local restaurants, area hotels, and retail businesses reap the benefits of these visitors, at times straining to accommodate the out-of-town onslaught.

That, community officials agree, means that the Z-Plex will become a major economic generator for the City, boosting the sales and use tax, establishing new businesses catering to visitors, creating more job opportunities, and furthering development of the surrounding land.

Truly, a rising tide lifts all boats, and in the case of the City of Melissa and the Melissa ISD, the rising tide appears limitless. ★

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